DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 248 635 EC 170 413

AUTHOR Foster, Herbert L.
TITLE Ribbin', Jivin', and Playin' the Dozens: Even More Important Today.
PUB DATE 83
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Minnesota Conference on Programming for the Developmental Needs of Adolescents with Behavioral Disorders (Minneapolis, MN, Fall, 1982). Contained in EC 170 401.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Black Culture; Black Dialects; Cultural Influences; Knowledge Level; *Minority Groups; Secondary Education; *Subcultures; Teacher Student Relationship

ABSTRACT

This is an autobiographical account of a teacher's first day in an inner city high school; it contains a discussion of the importance of understanding the subculture of one's students. The teacher's dress and comprehension of slang are noticed by the students. Incidents are related that illustrate the effects of ethnocentrism (the belief in the inherent superiority of one's own group and culture accompanied by a feeling of contempt for other groups and cultures) and specifically, the unequal enforcement of discipline, depending upon parents' economic background. The teacher, it is suggested, should be aware of student games (such as ribbin' and shuckin' and jivin') in order to stop them from getting out of hand. (CL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY CCBD TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED248635

Ribbin', Jivin', and Playin' the Dozens: Even More Important Today

Herbert L. Foster

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

The areas to be covered in this article include my first day of teaching in the New York City Public Schools; why *Ribbin', Jivin', and Playin' the Dozens* (Foster, 1974) is more important today; the importance of teacher dress in teacher/student relations; how ethnocentrism effects what we do in school; and the *Ribbin', Jivin', and Playin' the Dozens* games that *some* students use to test you.

My first day of teaching was at Haaran High School. I met with my department chairman on a Thursday, and he showed me to the room where I would teach mechanical drawing and blueprint reading. This room was large with tables around which 45 to 50 students would sit. Drawing boards and T-squares were on the tables, and I wanted to put them away. However, my chairman told me to leave them there and to tell my students not to use them until I gave the word. He also told me not to bother with homework and to take it easy on my students. I said "OK" but now realize that such an approach is racist.

To tell me not to make the same academic and behavioral demands on minority students that I would make on middle-class students is racist. To suggest that poor minority students cannot behave and learn is racist. As I was leaving he told me that I was the sixth substitute these students had had since the regular teacher quit 2 weeks ago.

The next day I put my name on the board and got set. When the class was seated, I introduced myself and told them how "tough" I was, and they would not drive me out the way they drove out the earlier teachers. As I spoke I noticed boys running out through one of the two doors. I rushed to close the door and noticed other boys going in and out of the second door. Finally I realized they wanted to see just how far they could go.

Suddenly someone threw a balled-up piece of paper at me. I ducked, the paper missed me, and I said, "If that is the best you can do, you better hang it up." Whereupon they showed me they could do better. Boys started throwing T-squares and drawing boards around the room; some ran across the table tops. I was so frightened, I hid in the desk's kneehole. There was so much noise; suddenly both doors flew open and there stood five teachers looking down at me. I really felt scared and embarrassed.

That weekend I considered suicide. What could I do with my life? All my life I had wanted to be a teacher. Here was my first chance, and I was a failure. I

EC170413

did come back on Monday. If you want to know what I did, you have to read *Ribbin'*.

Ribbin' is more important today for a number of reasons. Through the media, through the movement of blacks into white areas, and through the upward economic movement of blacks, their influence has increased. Indeed, much of the language and behavior of street-corner blacks is being picked up and exhibited by whites across all economic lines in almost all of American life.

Blue collar families have moved into traditionally suburban and rural school districts. Many excellent teachers with 10 to 20 years experience, used to traditionally middle-class students, are now beside themselves. They cannot work with the new youngsters who, in some ways, exhibit black street-corner behavior and language.

How many of you are baseball fans? Do you recall Frank Lucchesi being beaten up by Lenny Randle? The *New York Times* of March 29, 1977 reported, "The trouble began to brew last week when Lucchesi publicly referred to Randle as a 'punk' in answer to Randle's demands that he be given a chance to play regularly or be traded to another team." Later, there was an out-of-court settlement of a suit brought by Lucchesi. Lucchesi said "he learned that among blacks, the term 'punk' means 'sissy' or 'gay.' Lucchesi is white and Randle is black. Lucchesi said he did not intend to apply those terms to Randle" (New York Post, December 9, 1978).

Had Lucchesi read *Ribbin'*, that incident may not have happened. On page 133 of *Ribbin'*, I described an almost exact incident happening on a college campus. In 1981 at the Oakland-San Diego playoff game, Mike Adamle talked about someone selling "wolf tickets" all week. In writing in the *New York Times* on February 9, 1982, Dave Anderson quoted John Thomas, one of our former Olympic high jumpers, as saying, "Some of the kids I coach were woofing the old master last summer, so I did 6-6. That kept them quiet for a while." Does some of that language sound foreign? We will discuss the meanings of some of these words when we discuss street-corner behavior.

Also, in suburban and urban areas the number of minority students placed in special education programs is out of proportion to their total numbers in the district. Therefore, you should learn the language that may be used or kown by your students. That statement should not be considered as suggesting we not teach standard English. Indeed, our job is to teach middle-class saleable skills: to read, to write, and to do arithmetic. We have to teach the appropriate way to behave, to speak, and how to dress appropriately for the social situation.

Dress is one of the most important aspects of student-teacher relations. In most states teachers and students may wear whatever they wish as long as it does not interfere with curriculum, health, and safety. However, what you wear indicates how you feel about yourself, how you feel about your students and colleagues, and how you feel about your profession. Students keep records of how often you wear a particular dress, a sport coat, a skirt, or slacks. I know of cases where students could not pay attention to a teacher because the teacher's dress style was so terrible. Ask your students what they think of a male teacher who wears floods.

During the civil rights movement, many whites wore dirty, unpressed chinos or dungarees; they did not use deodorant, and rarely washed their hair when working in the black community. When you asked them why they did that, they often said it was the way they could relate to "those people." Actually, it was an unconscious racism. What they were saying was that

blacks are filthy; therefore, I dress in a slovenly way to relate to them. When you respect or feel good about yourself and those you work with, your dress is fresh, neat, and clean. Of course, that does not mean that if you just dress better you will automatically become a better teacher.

Another area that must be considered is how ethnocentric teacher behavior effects teaching and learning. Indeed, many students are in our programs because of ethnocentric behavior on the part of educators. Ethnocentrism is probably our greatest school and national problem. By ethnocentrism I mean (a) the belief in the inherent superiority of one's own group and culture accompanied by a feeling of contempt for other groups and cultures, and (b) a tendency to view alien groups or cultures in terms of one's own.

In 1968 the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders reported "Our nation is moving toward two societies — one black, one white — separate and unequal." That still holds today. And because we do not really know one another, we develop fantasies or misconceptions about one another. These misconceptions cause problems in the classroom as well as in everyday life.

Here are two examples. The Buffalo Teachers Federation (Breinin, 1981) reported that "kids have been suspended for walking in an insolent manner." This is called *pimp walk* in Buffalo. In New York City it is called *ditty boppin'*. You see the walk on television and movies; look for it. In school black male students have gotten in trouble walking that way. In December 1981 Dorothy Reed of station KGO-TV in San Francisco was suspended for two weeks for wearing her hair in a cornrow style. Before she returned to work, she had to modify her hair style (Buffalo Evening News, December 11, 1981).

Unquestionably color plays an important part in ethnocentrism. However, anywhere you may go on our spaceship earth, you will find ethnocentric behavior based on color, race, place of birth, social class, religion, tribe, area of origin, etc.

An example of ethnocentric behavior in our schools that was based on social class was described by Hollingshead in his book *Elmstown's Youth* (1949). In his study he found that students were disciplined depending upon the economic background of their parents.

In my work around the country, I have found the same conditions prevailing in most schools. In *Ribbin'* I reported four categories of students in inner-city schools. The first group were middle-class youngsters. Though they may have had only one parent at home and were on welfare, they were brought up with middle-class life styles and behaviors; i.e., they were taken to zoos, concerts, etc.

The next group were the street-corner youngsters who were 2 or 3 in a class of 30. These youngsters use street-corner coping and survival techniques to test you. These techniques are physical, aggressive, and sexual — three areas with which many teachers have problems. When the street-corner youngster tests you, he is also playing to the other children in the class. He is testing to see whether you are emotionally tough enough to make him control his behavior. In most cases he really wants to behave.

There are suburban and rural school equivalents to the street-corner youngster; for example; greasers, hard kids, yokies, freaks, hill kids, etc.

In a suburban school where I live, the groups include Preppies, (Sewer) Rats, and Jocks. The Preppies are typical middle-class youngsters; the Rats are to a large extent the poor, the minorities, and the alienated middle-class; the Jocks are the athletes.

If you are observant, you can see the various groups together; you can see

the differences in their dress. And as Hollingshead found, in many cases there is an unequal enforcement of discipline. Often teachers do not like the way the typical "hard" youngster looks, dresses, walks, behaves, smells, or speaks. Therefore, he is disciplined more than he should be, is suspended more than he should be, is placed in a special program, or drops out of school as soon as he can.

The following took place in a suburban high school. A black youngster and his teacher were arguing. The youngster realized he had better shut up or he was in trouble. However, the teacher kept after him and finally said, "This is not the city." Because that was the youngster's Achilles heel, he walked out of the class and was subsequently suspended.

Now I will demonstrate and discuss some of the street-corner games that give teachers and administrators so much trouble. One of my doctoral students, Dr. Richard Marotto in his dissertation (1978) referred to street-corner coping and survival techniques that included the dozens, ribbin', signifying, shuckin' and jivin', woofin', language (conducted), physicalness (acting out/-aggressive), nonverbal kinetic gestures (look, walk, stance, and greeting), mode of dress, working game, and putting someone on.

Youngsters playing the dozens (or any of its many names — gettin' in the kitchen, mama talk, gettin' in the crib, etc.) probably cause more problems in school than we realize. The dozens has been played all over the world. When I was growing up in Brooklyn, the Italian youngsters would say "Your mama's canary," and that would start a fight. In the Polish section of Buffalo, saying "Your mama wears combat boots" will start a fight, too.

There is a clean dozens and a dirty dozens. Some report the dozens is an attempt by young blacks to cut the umbilical cord from a matriarchal family. There also is a rhyming dozens. The dozens was even played in the original movie version of *M*A*S*H.*

In school one youngster may say something about another youngster's mother. For example, "Hey, I saw your mama on the street last night" or "Tell your mama she was good last night." Often, the result is a fight. Too often teachers do not understand the game. Therefore the game gets out of hand. If teachers would understand these games, they could intercede before the game escalated to a discipline problem.

Once you understand these games, you can develop a style for controlling them. For example, the easiest way to stop the dozens is to say, "I don't play that game." Very often the mere fact that the teacher knows the game is enough of a surprise for the students to stop it.

Ribbin' is another game or event. This is where a student makes fun of another's clothing, physical deformity, being on welfare, etc. A youngster may say that someone has "skippies" or "buddies" on. How many of you know what they are? Those are what inexpensive tennis, running shoes, or sneakers are called. Do you know the name for them in your school? You may call this behavior "mocking out" or "cutting down."

Sometimes the youngsters may say something such as, "You look clean, it must be mother's day," the implication being that he is on welfare and the welfare check arrived. Hence, he is able to dress okay. Also, a student will play the game on the teacher as he attempts to see how hip the teacher is, how well the teacher can handle the situation, or he may be contesting the teacher for control of the class.

Around Christmas time a youngster may ask his teacher, "Mrs. Reed, what does *trim* mean?" While this is going on the class, as though they were on a street corner, listens to see what will happen. How would you answer? Most

often the teacher will say, "To trim the tree." When that is the answer, the class often cracks up with laughter.

On the street corner, *trim* means sexual intercourse or vigina. Now that you know the meaning of trim, would you have answered the youngster differently?

Here are examples of how two female teachers dealt with a question about trim. In one case the teacher was hip. She said, "What's the matter — you're not getting any so you are talking about it." In the other case the teacher was straight and conservative. She said, "Look, I don't want that game played in this room. If you want to play that game, do it outside in the street, not in my class. I am being paid to teach." Both approaches were effective. The objective is to get order and to teach.

Signifyin' is another street-corner activity involving at least two participants. Among students it often works this way. One student may go over to another and say, "Larry said your mama is a ho(whore)." He will then go over to a second student and say, "Frank said your mama is a ho." Most often, Larry and Frank end up arguing or fighting.

The game is also played on teachers. A number of boys may go over to a teacher and say, "Mr. Green said you always have bad breath." They will then go to Mr. Green and say, "Mr. Smith said you always wear ankle breakers."

Shuckin' and Jivin' is a technique that blacks have often used to save their lives; for some, it has been a safety valve. Historically, blacks have used it to act the monkey or helpless soul that fulfills one of the white's misconceptions. For example, if you recall the television movie, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pitman*, you may recall a scene after the war where she and a young child are picked up by a black man driving a wagon. As they talk normally, a group of whites on horseback and carrying guns suddenly accosts them. The whites ask some questions, and the black man responds with, "Yes, massa, I be doin' dat," etc. He, through his speech pattern and body ovements, fulfills the dumb, unknowing, and subservient black man for those on horseback. Had he acted defiantly, he probably would have been shot or lynched.

In school a youngster may be in a classroom causing a problem. About the time he expects the principal to arrive, he rushes out of the room. The principal stops him and asks where he is going. In response, he indicates that there are some crazy things going on in that room, and he does not wish to get in trouble: that is why he left. He may also whine a bit to indicate he is being a good defenseless child. Usually the principal will let him go.

The last event I will mention is *woofin'* which can be a number of things. It can be used as a very physical, aggressive, and sexual tactic used by some boys or girls to intimidate teachers (I have observed woofs succeeding against very middle-class black and white teachers.) It may also be a youngster threatening someone. Or *to sell woof tickets* may be to threaten but not being able to back it up.

For the teacher, it may mean a youngster blocking his way in the hall by standing in his way, by placing his hand on the wall and blocking his way, or it may be walking down the hall with his belt buckle open. For these woofs to work, the misconceptions of the teacher and the student have to be played out. What are misconceptions that whites have about black men, and what are the misconceptions that blacks have about white men? Think about it.

You need not answer these questions, just think about them. Those of you who are white, when you were growing up, how many of you had parents who socialized with people of a different race, religion, or social class? And as adults, how many of you have friends you see socially who are of a different

race, religion, or social class? And of those of you who are black, I would ask the same questions about your parents and about you.

Socially, some of you may see people of a different race, class, or religion. However, most people socialize with friends of their own religion, class, or race. Hence, because we do not know those of other religions, races, or classes from first hand experiences, when someone tries to sell us a woof ticket, we very often buy it.

Let us discuss a woof taking place in school. A male student with an Afro is walking down the hall with some friends. As they come alongside a new male teacher, the young man blocks his way by putting his hand out and onto the wall. How would you react to that? Think about it.

In reaction one, the teacher asks the student why he is doing this to him because he is not prejudiced like some of the other teachers. The student does not respond, but keeps looking into his eyes. Whereupon, the teacher walks under his hand or around him. In reaction two, the teacher asks the same questions, when no answer is given, he panics and hits the student. Whereupon, the student hits him back. In reaction three as the student moves to block the teacher's way, the teacher grabs his arm, and moves him out of the way. Would you react in any of those ways?

After reaction one and later that afternoon, the young man who woofed on the teacher saw him in the hall and called out, "Hi, Mr. Faggot." Here the teacher lost the contest; he was afraid.

In reaction two, the student hit the teacher back and was suspended. The report the teacher completed indicated that the youngster hit him; no mention was made of the fact that he hit the student first.

In reaction three, as the teacher moved the youngster out of the way, the other boys said to their friend, "Hey, you tryin' to make the teacher walk around you?" In this case the teacher did not panic, and if he were afraid, he did not show it. Unquestionably, when he grabbed the youngster who was blocking his way, he could have been hit.

Those were just three ways of handling a woof.

SUMMARY

First, get to know everything about your students' culture or subculture. Second, develop a teaching style based on your personality. What works for you may not work for others. However, if it works for you, that is what counts.

Also, although almost all your black students understand these games, usually only 2 or 3 street-corner youngsters in a class of 30 will attempt to test you with their street-corner coping and survival techniques. There are many youngsters in your class who are black and poor and whose parents or parent have provided them with middle-class aspirations.

All of us have used our middle-class saleable skills to get and hold our jobs. It is our responsibility, therefore, to provide our students with middle-class saleable skills so that they, if they choose, can also make it economically into middle-class America.

REFERENCES

Anderson, D. (1982, February 9). The Olympic secret of John Thomas. *New York Times*, p. B18.

Breinin C. (1981, January). Too many suspensions? Why not 'magnetize' instead? *Buffalo Teachers Federation Provocator*, p. 11

Foster, H. L. (1974). *Ribbin', jivin', and playin' the dozens: The unrecognized dilemma of inner-city schools.* Cambridge, MA: Ballinger Publishing.

Hollingshead, A. B. (1949). *Elmtown's youth: The impact of social class on adolescents.* New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Lucchesi settles amicably. (1978, December 9). *New York Post,* p. 65.

Manager hospitalized by player's punches. (1977, March 29). *New York Times.*

Marotto, R. A. (1978). Posin' to be chosen: An ethnographic study of ten lower-class black male adolescents in an urban high school. *Dissertation Abstracts International, 39,* 1234-A. (University Microfilms No. 78-14, 236)

TV reporter modifies hair. (1981, December 11). *Buffalo Evenig News,* p. 2.

Herbert L. Foster, Professor and Director, The Institute on Classroom Management and School Discipline, State University of New York at Buffalo, Faculty of Educational Studies, 582 Brady Hall, Amherst, New York 14260